The Urbanization of Warrior Symbolism: Traditional Indigenous Representation in Canada's Indigenous Gang Culture

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Abstract

Indigenous peoples are overrepresented in the Canadian criminal justice system and are disproportionately involved in gang-related activities. This issue is particularly prevalent in communities such as Winnipeg's North End, where gang culture has become normalized. The persistence of gang affiliation among Indigenous peoples is rooted in the legacy of colonialism, contributing to systemic marginalization and social dislocation. Through a semi-systematic literature review and visual ethnography, this paper explored the integration of traditional Indigenous symbols within Indigenous gang culture to understand how aspects of Indigenous identity were incorporated into gangs. The research paper revealed that Indigenous gangs incorporated these symbols not only to assert resistance against colonial narratives but also to reclaim historically marginalized aspects of Indigenous identity. The paper concluded that the use of traditional Indigenous symbols in gang culture was a form of cultural reclamation, offering a sense of empowerment through the contemporary use of the warrior. These findings can provide valuable insights for policymakers and community leaders, suggesting that programs focused on positive cultural revitalization could help address gang involvement by providing a sense of cultural identity that no longer needs to be found through gang involvement.

Land Acknowledgement

Mount Royal University is situated on an ancient and storied land steeped in ceremony and history that, until recently, was occupied exclusively by people Indigenous to this place. In the spirit of respect, reciprocity and truth, we honour and acknowledge Moh'kinsstis and the traditional Treaty 7 territory and oral practices of the Blackfoot confederacy: Siksika, Kainai, Piikani, Stoney Nakoda Nations: Chiniki, Bearspaw, Goodstoney and Tsuut'ina Nation. We acknowledge that this territory is home to the Otipemisiwak Métis Government of the Métis Nation within Alberta Districts 5 and 6. Finally, we recognize all Nations – Indigenous and non-Indigenous – who live, work, and play on this land and honour and celebrate this territory.

Situating Myself

As a mixed white settler and Indigenous researcher, I must acknowledge the complexities surrounding this topic of study. I position myself as a researcher who can provide my own Indigenous identity and knowledge, and how this shapes my perspectives, biases, and interpretations throughout the research process. My background as a Mohawk woman, with my paternal family from Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory, specifically The Mohawks Bay of Quinte, has been foundational to the life knowledge I have gained and offers valuable insights and connections to this research. I often apply the teachings I've received from my own Elders, who have shared wisdom and guidance, in my work as a researcher and student. However, I also acknowledge the diversity of Indigenous cultures in Canada and the unique identities of different Indigenous peoples, understanding that each community has its own distinct traditions and worldviews. Given the historical exclusion of Indigenous voices in research, I recognize the importance of incorporating the voices, teachings, and knowledge of Elders. By doing so, I seek to challenge traditional hierarchies of credibility and prioritize the potential for this research to benefit Indigenous communities in the future.

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Indigenous peoples are disproportionately represented in the Canadian Criminal Justice system, having high recidivism and incarceration rates, with many incarcerated individuals involved in gang-related activities. In Canada, especially in Winnipeg's North End, Indigenous peoples are plagued with violence in their communities stemming from gang involvement and gang culture. Gang involvement is so common within these predominantly Indigenous communities that it is seen as socially normal to be or know someone who is in a gang or gang-affiliated. The legacy of colonial policies, such as the residential school system and the Sixties Scoop, has had devastating impacts on Indigenous families and cultures. The intergenerational effects of these policies have contributed to social dislocation, economic disadvantage, and a sense of isolation, leading to an increased interest in the gang lifestyle. This study investigates Indigenous gang culture in Canada, focusing on these gangs' origins and associated cultural practices. Specifically, it explores the incorporation of traditional Indigenous representations within gang culture, examining how and why various symbols, such as the imagery of the warrior, are utilized by many Indigenous gangs across the country.

Exploring Indigenous gang culture and its use of traditional symbolism is a significant way to uncover the continuous influence of Euro-Canadian policies and the legacy of colonization on Indigenous peoples within the criminal justice system. Today, the Canadian Government has implemented diverse programs and restorative justice initiatives to try to reduce the number of Indigenous incarcerated individuals and Indigenous peoples entering the criminal justice system. However, to reduce these numbers and the recidivism rate amongst Indigenous people, it is first important to look at the root causes of these problems and how Indigenous

peoples are responding. By looking at Indigenous gang culture in Canada and how Indigenous gang members are using aspects of traditional Indigenous representation within their gang culture, this paper uncovers themes of resistant identities to explain what is causing this phenomenon. This investigation into traditional Indigenous symbolism in Canada's Indigenous gang culture is valuable in the discourse of Criminal Justice and other disciplines interested in exploring the cause of certain aspects of Indigenous gang culture. It provides valuable insights into how traditional cultural elements intersect with contemporary issues in Indigenous communities, highlighting the complexities of identity, resilience, and expression within gang culture.

Research Aims, Objectives, and Question(s)

While prior research has addressed general aspects of Indigenous gangs and their historical roots linked to colonial impacts, there remains a gap in the literature specifically addressing Indigenous gang culture. Previous studies have highlighted statistics related to Indigenous victimization and offending rates, such as Monchalin's (2016) *The Colonial Problem*, as well as factors leading individuals to join gangs such as Dziewanski and Henry's (2023) ethnographic comparative analysis and Comack et al's. (2009) study, showing the continuous influence of Euro-Canadian policies and the legacy of colonization on Indigenous peoples within the criminal justice system. However, Indigenous gang culture, distinct from other gang cultures, has received limited attention. This study aims to fill that gap by examining the unique cultural aspects of Indigenous gangs and the significance of traditional symbols in contemporary contexts.

By examining the use of traditional Indigenous symbolism in Indigenous gang culture, the research uncovers the deeper meanings behind their use and the reasons they are embedded

in Canada's Indigenous gang culture. This research contributes to an in-depth understanding of the context behind their use by analyzing how and why these symbols are integrated into gang culture. Additionally, it aspires to explore the potential for transforming these symbols from representations of deviance and criminality into positive cultural expressions, thus informing the discourse on Indigenous identity and resilience. The findings can help inform governments and policymakers of new rehabilitation or cultural programs or services that can help Indigenous youths connect back with their traditional Indigenous teachings in a positive way rather than a deviant one. Overall, this project aims to answer the research question, "How are aspects of traditional Indigenous representation being incorporated into Canada's Indigenous gang culture?".

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts an exploratory research design. Given the limited existing research on this topic, an exploratory approach allows the project to generate new insights and familiarity rather than relying on pre-existing data or attempting to predict outcomes (Stebbins, 2001). An exploratory research design also allows the research to generate new ideas and assumptions in the discourse of Indigenous gang culture and direct future research on this topic (Stebbins, 2001). This study utilizes two methodological approaches to research Indigenous gang culture and its traditional symbolism. First, a semi-systematic literature review examines existing literature on the topic. A semi-systematic review is particularly well-suited because Indigenous gang culture is explored from multiple disciplinary perspectives, such as criminology, criminal justice, sociology, and Indigenous studies. This approach is designed for areas where research has been conceptualized in various ways across different fields (Snyder, 2019). Additionally, to fully

understand Indigenous gang culture, it is essential to consider the historical factors that have contributed to the emergence of Indigenous gangs, a phenomenon that has developed over an extended period. A semi-systematic literature review aims to identify and understand relevant research traditions and synthesize these, which helps achieve this study's aim of exploring themes of Indigenous gang culture (Snyder, 2019).

Second, the study also uses visual ethnography to examine photographs and images of cultural aspects within gang symbolism. Visual ethnography, a methodology focused on identifying visual aspects of culture, leads to the identification of deeper cultural meanings within gang culture (Pink, 2007). It is also well-suited for pairing with other types of methodology, such as a semi-systematic literature review, to uncover and examine cultural aspects (Pink, 2007).

Data Collection, Methods, and Sources

The method of literature collection used in this thesis involves both online and printed data collection. By incorporating online and printed sources, the research gathers a broader range of materials and enhances the scope of research available. For data collection of the literature, this study uses secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, published books and book chapters, reports, government documents, and web pages. The literature is accessed using data sources such as the Mount Royal University (MRU) Library Database, Google Scholar, ProQuest, Taylor and Francis Online, Statistics Canada, Sage Journals, Credo Reference, Sponsor Natural, etc. Keywords used to find and collect literature include “Indigenous gang culture,” “Indigenous gangs,” “Gang culture,” “Gang symbolism,” “Traditional Indigenous symbolism,” “Aboriginal Gangs,” “Native Gangs,” “Gang identity,” “Indigenous identity,” and “Indigenous incarceration.” This literature advances the investigation into Indigenous gang

culture by providing a thorough understanding of the historical, cultural, and socio-political factors that shape gang identity and symbolism, as well as their impact on Indigenous communities.

The study also uses online data collection for photographs. Photographs depicting Indigenous gang culture and Indigenous symbolism are examined and included within the study to inform the research. These images are accessed and collected from various sources, such as news articles, reports, blogs, and government presentations and publications. Key themes used to collect such images include tattoos, colours, clothing, logos, and gang titles or names. Keywords used to find and collect these images include Canadian Indigenous gang names such as “Indian Posse,” “Manitoba Warriors,” “Saskatchewan Warriors,” “Redd Alert,” “Crazy Cree,” “Native Syndicate,” “Indian Mafia,” “West Side Boys,” etc. These photographs advance the investigation by providing insights and visual proof of how traditional Indigenous symbolism and representation are displayed in Indigenous gang culture. All photographs within the published version of this paper have been removed in accordance with copyright legislation.

Data Analysis

The literature is analyzed using thematic analysis to identify, explore, and report patterns in the form of themes within the selected texts. This method allows for the coding of the literature into relevant themes related to the topics of gang culture, Indigenous gang culture, and Indigenous traditional representation within gang culture (Snyder, 2019). As the literature is organized, several key themes are identified. These include the colonial factors leading to Indigenous gangs, as well as other determinants influencing gang entry and involvement, such as family ties, racialized poverty, surviving and reclaiming empowerment after colonization, and gaining power and respect. Additionally, themes specific to Indigenous gang culture are

explored, including hypermasculinity, violence, the sexual hierarchy, and visual symbolism. By examining these themes in the literature on Indigenous gang involvement, the research addresses the root causes behind why Indigenous individuals join gangs. It also explores why certain cultural elements emerge within Indigenous gang culture, offering more profound insight into the dynamics of these communities.

The photographs are analyzed using visual content analysis to identify and explore cultural significance within gang symbolism. Visual content analysis allows research to uncover the media's meaning and make general statements about aspects of representation, such as traditional Indigenous symbolism (Bell, 2004). This paper also utilizes visual content analysis to determine the presence of specific themes or concepts within the images and analyze the meanings and relationships of traditional representation found within the images of gang symbolism, examining how these aspects of traditional Indigenous symbolism are used in gang culture (Tinkler, 2014).

Limitations

Being an exploratory research, the study may be limited in its ability to provide a definitive conclusion about the findings; instead, it provides insights into Indigenous gang culture as a whole (Stebbins, 2001). In the semi-systematic literature review context, this methodology focuses primarily on secondary data, which may result in missing valuable first-hand insights into Indigenous gang culture, such as those obtained through interviews. Furthermore, the limited timeframe for conducting the review may lead to the exclusion of relevant articles that could be valuable to the project. It is also important to acknowledge the potential for researcher bias in the selection process, as literature that does not align with the research question may be unintentionally excluded, limiting the scope of the review. When using

visual ethnography as a research methodology, the scope of representation may be limited since photographs are static captures of time, which may not be able to relay the complexities of the entire cultural significance. Moreover, there are limited photographs available depicting Indigenous gang symbolism, and as such, the availability of photographs that this research works with is quite limited.

Indigenous Gangs in Canada

Street gangs have been around for years despite there being no easily agreed-upon definition for them. Dr. Henry explains that Frederic Thrasher's original definition of a street gang is "an interstitial group originally formed spontaneously and then integrated through conflict" and is characterized by behaviour such as meeting face-to-face, milling, movement through space as a unit, conflict, and planning (Henry, 2015, p. 187; Thrasher, 1927). However, the definition of a street gang in gang research has since changed to focus more on criminality (Henry, 2015). Indigenous gangs, on the other hand, are a relatively new phenomenon, only emerging in the late 1980s and early 90s (Comack & Deane, 2013). For the purposes of this research paper, an Indigenous gang is defined as a street gang made up of predominantly Indigenous members, often taking part in illegal activity, and formed as a response to systemic challenges and shaped by socio-economic contexts in which the gang exists. It is also important to note that not all members are required to be Indigenous for the group to be considered an Indigenous gang. Indigenous peoples, who made up 5.0% of Canada's population in 2021, totalling 1.8 million individuals (Statistics Canada, 2023), are increasingly impacted by gang involvement. Despite their relatively small share of the population, Indigenous gangs have become a significant and growing issue, making them one of the most common types of gangs in Canada. The first Indigenous gang to emerge in Canada was in 1980 in Manitoba and was known

as The Indian Posse, followed by a second Indigenous gang called The Manitoba Warriors (Bucerius et al., 2021). In the early days of Indigenous gangs, these groups were initially only involved in petty crimes or not involved in criminal activity at all. For example, when the police first had contact with The Indian Posse, they were only a robbery crew, and during the Oka Crisis, The Manitoba Warriors were used for security on the reserves (Friesen, 2011; Comack & Deane, 2013). However, this was short-lived, as the Manitoba Warriors moved into the drug trade in the mid-1990s and gained ties to the Hells Angels, another high-level gang operating all over Canada and the United States (Comack & Deane, 2013). As Indigenous gangs started to harm people outside of rival gang members, both the police and media started to pay attention (Bucerius et al., 2021).

As mentioned, despite their names and appearances, Indigenous gang membership is not exclusively tied to Indigenous heritage. By the late 1960s, the Indian Posse had more than 1,000 members, and as they expanded from coast to coast, their numbers grew, bringing cultural mixing (Henry, 2015; Friesen, 2011). Many other Indigenous gangs followed in the cultural mixing to increase their numbers. Soon enough, Manitoba and Saskatchewan were filled with Indigenous gangs such as The Native Syndicate, Crazy Cree, Redd Alert, Indian Mafia, Saskatchewan Warriors, Alberta Warriors, Kelowna Warriors, Mixed Blood, and The West Side Boys (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008). In 2006, Criminal Intelligence Services Canada (CISC) reported that there were 344 street gangs across the country, comprising 11,900 members, with Saskatchewan having the highest concentration of gangs, many of which were predominantly composed of Indigenous members (Totten & Totten, 2012). This high prevalence of Indigenous gang members can be attributed to the impact colonialism has had and continues to have on Indigenous peoples and communities.

The Impact of Colonialism

Colonialism, along with its tools and institutions such as Residential Schools, The Sixties Scoop, The Indian Act, Forced Sterilization of Indigenous women, The Pass System, the illegalization of traditional Indigenous practices and ways of life, and many more, in its attempt to assimilate and eradicate Canada's Indigenous peoples, have left Indigenous communities disconnected from their cultures, struggling with systemic inequities, and facing ongoing cycles of trauma and marginalization. These impacts on Indigenous communities have left them in search of reclaiming stolen identities and resisting colonial powers. Due to the negative legacy colonialism left behind for Indigenous communities, the urge to resist these contemporary colonial powers has led Indigenous men to collectively work to resist these oppressive conditions (Comack & Deane, 2013). In their book on Indigenous street gangs, *"Indians Wear Red"*, Comack and Deane suggest that Indigenous gangs have emerged as a collective response to resisting colonial conditions, something that gang members often see as a means of fighting marginalization rather than becoming a victim (2013). The emergence of Indigenous gangs in Canada can also be seen as a result of specific colonial legacies. Violence in the household, for example, was a common phenomenon learned from residential schools and passed down intergenerationally. This led to many Indigenous youths adopting these violent behaviours on the street and, eventually, resulted in the emergence of violent street gangs (Comack & Deane, 2013). Another aspect of colonial legacies which has impacted the emergence of Indigenous street gangs is the ongoing poverty and educational disparities in Indigenous communities. This correlation can be seen in Winnipeg's North End, which was the location where many Indigenous gangs emerged and is also considered to be Canada's poorest and most violent neighbourhood (Dorries, 2019). This idea is reinforced through the connection of these colonial

legacies to the members of The Indian Posse. For example, there are seven founding members of The Indian Posse, all of whom came from poor backgrounds, and Daniel Wolfe, one of these founding members, barely had a sixth-grade education himself (Friesen, 2011). Through this, it can be seen that the emergence of Indigenous gangs in Canada is not merely a product of personal choices but rather a response to the systemic effects of colonialism. While the emergence of Indigenous gangs in Canada is often linked to the legacies of colonialism, the reasons individuals choose to join these gangs may appear to be more personal. However, for Indigenous youths and young adults, these choices are still deeply influenced by the lasting impacts of colonialism.

Entering Indigenous Gangs

While there is a gap in the existing literature regarding Indigenous gangs separate from gangs in general, there are similarities between Indigenous gangs and other groups that have also experienced colonialism and many of its impacts, such as African gangs. Dziewanski and Henry (2023) conducted an ethnographic comparative analysis between coloured gangs of Cape Town and Indigenous gangs in the Canadian prairies and found that colonization and its effects, such as segregation, marginalization, and criminalization of racialized groups, are not only key factors in the creation of racialized gangs but also critical factors influencing racialized individuals to enter gangs. For example, one factor influencing black youths in Cape Town to join gangs that can be applied to Indigenous individuals, as Dziewanski and Henry (2023) explain, is family ties. In Dziewanski and Henry's (2023) comparative analysis, for example, they found that many of the interviewees mention how it was a family member or family friend who brought them into the gang life, with many of them often following older siblings, cousins, or other extended family into gangs (Dziewanski & Henry, 2023; Comack et al., 2009). One of the interviewees even

stated that it was his familial connections to both gangs and street life that led him to become one of the youngest members of The Native Syndicate (Dziewanski & Henry, 2023). Gang involvement through familial ties can even happen as young as infancy. As Nimmo (2001) explains, babies of gang members are often born into gangs. With many Indigenous youths having family members involved in gangs, gang membership becomes easily perceived as normalized. After speaking with many different Indigenous communities and their members on issues of Indigenous street gangs, Henry (2015) concluded that Indigenous youths often had so many friends and family in the criminal justice system that it was not something to be feared but instead as a way to construct a street identity. Overall, this strong familial connection to gangs serves as a significant risk factor, as Indigenous youths are more likely to follow in the footsteps of relatives involved in gang life, which in turn increases their chances of entering gangs themselves and, ultimately, engaging in criminal activity. Although family ties are a common risk factor leading Indigenous peoples into gangs, it is not the only risk factor that increases the likelihood of gang involvement.

In addition to family ties, the literature also points to other factors influencing individuals to join Indigenous gangs, such as racialized poverty. After meeting with six members of a Winnipeg street gang who wanted to convey their experience living in the North End, their thoughts on the recent events that have occurred there, and their insights into what it will take to make meaningful change, Comack et al. (2009) found that colonialism often manifests itself through racialized poverty, particularly in Winnipeg's North End, where many Indigenous youths are drawn to the gang lifestyle as a means of financial survival. This racialized poverty is further perpetuated by the educational gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, as noted by Monchalin (2016), which limits opportunities and fosters a cycle of marginalization. Many

individuals in these marginalized communities turn to street gangs as a way to achieve financial stability (Comack & Deane, 2013). In the context of Winnipeg's North End, where poverty is common, gang life is often glamorized, making it seem like a viable option for Indigenous peoples seeking to overcome their socio-economic struggles (Comack et al., 2009). This cycle of poverty, deeply rooted in colonial history, is not only difficult to break but is also passed down intergenerationally, continuing to impact Indigenous families and communities (Comack & Deane, 2013).

Much of the literature reviewed also depicts themes of survivance and reclaiming power and connections that were taken by colonialism as explanations as to why Indigenous peoples enter gangs. Many scholars argue that the consequences of colonialism, such as inequity, racism, dislocation, marginalization, and cultural and spiritual alienation, often drive Indigenous individuals towards gangs (Bucerius et al., 2021). Specifically, colonization resulted in upbringings that have left Indigenous peoples with limited life choices, often resulting in Indigenous gangs being less of an optional choice and more of a temporary strategy for survival (Comack & Deane, 2013; Dutton, 1999). This is further proven in Dziewanski and Henry's (2023) ethnographic comparative analysis, which found that joining gangs is often a calculated decision to gain what participants believe is their best survival opportunity. While the survival gang members are looking for could be the promise to fulfill basic needs that are not provided elsewhere, such as food, shelter, and clothing, it is also emotional survival that they are looking for that is often found through connection to others in similar situations (Comack & Deane, 2013; Foster & Grekul, 2024). While traditional Indigenous parenting provided children with connection and belonging, colonial institutions such as residential schools and the Sixties Scoop took Indigenous children away from their homes and disrupted patterns of healthy attachments,

something that is still seen to have impacts on Indigenous communities today (Foster & Grekul, 2024). Not only did these institutions take Indigenous children away from their primary caregivers, but many past residential school students found it challenging to feel a sense of belonging in society, whether that be their own Indigenous community or society as a whole (Monchalin, 2016). Due to this colonial impact, it is common for Indigenous youths in Winnipeg's North End to grow up in a household with only one parent or to be in The Child Welfare System, and because of this, Indigenous youths often seek these relationships and connections elsewhere (Comack & Deane, 2013; Monchalin, 2016). Buddle (2011) explains how street socialization occurs in the absence of home and school socialization. Specifically, disenfranchised men were left trying to form their own identity, which was commonly found in the streets or in prisons (Bucerius, 2014; Garot, 2010), and while Indigenous gangs can provide a sense of relationship that they are unable to get from their parents, gangs can also substitute for family and act as a type of brotherhood, helping with identity formation (Buddle, 2011; Bucerius et al., 2021).

Lastly, colonialism has often left Indigenous peoples yearning for a sense of empowerment, a need that can be fulfilled through reclaiming pride and earning respect in gangs. Money and gaining respect are sometimes even said to be the most common reasons for joining a gang (Chalas & Grekul, 2017). Dziewanski and Henry (2023) write that in some of the interviews they analyzed, the participants explained that they joined the gang because it gave them power and made them feel important. While Indigenous gangs are often seen to be empowered, gaining this power was something you had to earn within the gang, often through violence and fear between gang members (Bucerius et al., 2021; Henry, 2015). For example, Henry (2015) found that gang members are encouraged to commit acts of violence to gain power

and respect. Getting incarcerated, as Comack and Deane (2013) explain, is also a way to gain status and respect within gangs. In addition to violent behaviours, gaining power and respect drives other behaviours in gangs, creating a gang culture.

Gang Culture and Gang Symbolism

This paper uses its own definition of gang culture, derived from William's (2022) chapter on Liberian gangs and the impact of pop culture. For the purpose of this research, gang culture refers to the norms, values, beliefs, and customs associated with a street gang that are passed down from generation to generation (Williams, 2022). These elements dictate how members interact with one another and outsiders and shape how the gang is perceived through behaviours, actions, and visual markers, which may be deemed either legal or illegal.

The literature reviewed highlights critical themes in gang culture, including violence, which is one behaviour that is commonly seen within gang culture of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous gangs alike. Monchalin (2016) states that experiencing violence in childhood, as many survivors of residential schools did, is an example of an adverse childhood experience (ACE), something that plays a significant role in creating trauma in Indigenous communities and is often passed down intergenerationally. As such, the violence inflicted and experienced in Indigenous gangs may have been adopted from the violence many Indigenous youths experience at home (Foster & Grekul, 2024). It is a common phenomenon for gangs to raid, jump, and beat up rival gang members and leaders (Comack & Deane, 2013). Violence is not only present in gangs but also encouraged, as one way for a new member to get noticed by leaders is by committing acts of violence. "Missions" are also tasks put on gang members that involve criminal acts such as assault, robbery, and selling drugs (Chalas & Grekul, 2017). However, violence in gangs is not always directed toward outsiders and many times, violence is directed

toward gang-associated women or even experienced between fellow gang members. Violence on the streets often spills into relationships with women, and as Comack and Deane (2013) found in their research, one gang member explained that while violence against women is often frowned upon in gangs, it still happens frequently, nonetheless. Violence between gang members is ritualized and can include getting "jumped in" or "beaten out," which is when gang members beat up a fellow member as a way of initiation into the gang or as an exit ceremony when a member leaves the gang (Comack & Deane, 2013). Getting jumped in or jumped out, as one Indigenous gang member explains, was learned from media and movies (Comack & Deane, 2013).

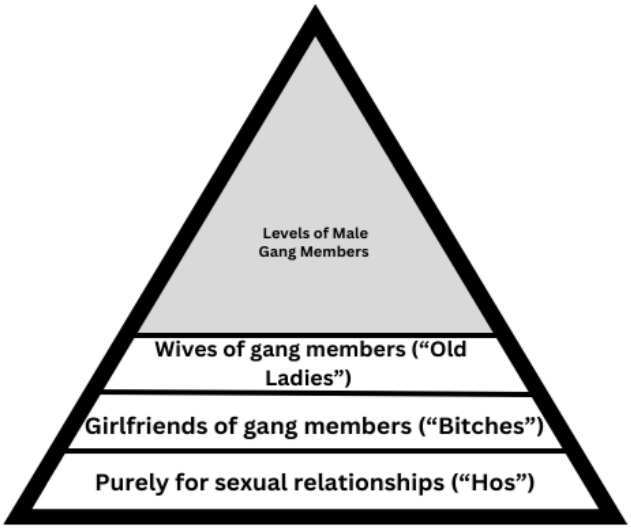
As Henry (2015) and Comack and Deane (2013) argue, violence is a significant aspect of gang culture that is often accompanied by hypermasculinity. The prevalence of hypermasculinity being displayed in Indigenous gang culture can be attributed to the loss of traditional masculine rites of passage, traditional values, and places in Indigenous communities due to colonization (Henry, 2015). Because of the loss of traditional means of achieving masculinity, resulting in a lack of positive male role models in many Indigenous youths' lives, as Henry (2015) explains, Indigenous men are resorting to violence to display what he calls a "hypermasculine extortion of power," and soon, street gangs became spaces for Indigenous males to act violently and assert hypermasculine notions of masculinity (p. 188). As mentioned, violence and hypermasculinity are two aspects of gang culture that go hand-in-hand, where gang members perform hypermasculine acts, such as readily resorting to violence (West & Zimmerman, 1987). One way hypermasculinity makes its way into gang culture is through the perception of how others view you as either acting "hard" or "soft" (Comack & Deane, 2013). While acting soft is associated with females or individuals who are not in gangs, acting hard is associated with males and

individuals in a gang who are tough and reliable. If someone wants to be perceived as a "real man" in a gang, they commit acts that will make them look hard, such as robbing banks and assaulting people (Comack & Deane, 2013).

There is also a sexual hierarchy that is exhibited in gang culture, which sees men at the top and women categorized at the bottom. Many times, in gangs, steady relationships with women are not typical, and the gap between males and females in gang cultures is often significant. As Comack and Deane (2013) explain, not only are females frequently placed at the bottom of the sexual hierarchy of gangs, but they also have their own statuses as females that give them more or less importance in the gang. These categories usually include "old ladies", "bitches", and "hos" and can be seen in ***Figure 1***. "Old ladies" are placed at the top of these three categories for women and refer to the wives of gang members, "Bitches" are just below on the sexual hierarchy and refer to the girlfriends of gang members; and "Hos" are placed at the bottom of the hierarchy and are there purely for sexual relationships (Comack & Deane, 2013). These interconnected patterns of violence, hypermasculinity, and attitudes toward women come together to form a gang culture that has emerged from a history of socio-cultural disruption and marginalization, influencing both Indigenous and non-Indigenous gang members alike.

Figure 1

Sexual Hierarchy in Gang Culture



Note: This figure demonstrates the sexual hierarchy in gang culture as described by Comack & Dean (2013), which sees men at the top and women at the bottom, attributing higher status to women who are in more serious or committed relationships with gang members.

Visual Gang Culture and Symbolism

In addition to the behaviours that are exhibited in gangs, gang culture can also be displayed visually, such as symbolism or gang appearance. However, the existing literature is limited in its focus on visual gang culture and appearances of Indigenous gangs specifically and as such, this section focuses on the visual gang culture of street gangs in general.

Gang members often display specific images of themselves in order to maintain their reputation in the gang. For example, gang members will show their success through materialistic items they can flaunt around, such as gold chains, nice clothes, and TVs, and some gang members will even buy cars without having a driver's licence solely to look wealthy (Comack & Deane, 2013). In addition to individual appearance in gangs, symbolism representing gangs as a whole is also present. As Totten and Totten (2012) explain, names, symbols, colours, signs, graffiti tags, clothing styles, bandanas, and accessories are all means of gang representation. Visual gang culture also encompasses forms of communication between gang members, such as gang or hand signals. The Bloods and the Crips, for example, are two significant gangs in North America that use hand signals, graffiti tags, and specific colours and letters. Bloods use the colour red, red bandanas, the letter C crossed out, and anti-crip graffiti. The Crips use the colour blue, blue bandanas, the letter C in place of B in writing, and call themselves “BK” for “Blood Killers” (Totten & Totten, 2012). Many Bloods also use hand signals to create a lowercase B to represent their gang.

Gang tattoos are another form of visual gang culture used both to represent a gang and for intimidation purposes. There are many different types of gang tattoos one could get. For example, gang names in large bold letters are often used for intimidation, while crosses between the knuckles signify that the member spent a number of years in federal prisons (Totten & Totten, 2012). Three dots or cigarette burns near the thumb, wrist, or eye represent having lived a crazy life. At the same time, teardrop tattoos can have a variety of meanings, like the member has killed a rival gang member, spent time in prison, or is memorializing the death of a fellow gang member or family member (Totten & Totten, 2012). Gang tattoos can even be acquired in custody and are especially common among Indigenous gang members. This is evidenced in Chalas and Grekul's (2017) research, where they conducted 175 semi-structured interviews with male and female ex-gang members in correctional institutions and found that 40% of the sample reported having gang tattoos, and 63% of participants who got their gang tattoos in custody were Indigenous. Gang tattoos are also a symbol of pride for one's gang, and covering gang tattoos is often considered illicit by gang members. Overall, one's individual appearance and gang appearance all come together to give a strong tell on whether someone is part of a gang and create visual gang culture. While Indigenous gangs do exhibit these aspects of gang culture that are commonly found in many street gangs, Indigenous gangs, with their unique experience of colonialism and their ties to Indigenous cultures, also display traditional Indigenous aspects and symbolism in their gang culture. How these are used, as well as common themes of their use, are examined using visual content analysis.

Visual Content Analysis of Indigenous Gang Culture

Through visual content analysis, this study analyzes over forty photographs that focus on various aspects of Indigenous visual gang culture. These include tattoos, logos, the use of

specific colours, clothing, graffiti/tags, and gang member group photos. All of these photos provide insights into the ways in which aspects of mainstream gang cultures and traditional Indigenous cultures are being incorporated into these gangs.

Adoption of Non-Traditional Visual Gang Culture

In addition to the traditional Indigenous symbols and elements incorporated into Indigenous gang culture, which will be explored later on, the photographs examined reveal that Indigenous visual gang culture also shares many of the common characteristics found in the visual culture of street gangs more broadly. For instance, many group photos of gang members reveal that Indigenous gangs share a distinct gang culture, characterized by members dressing in similar styles and colours. These colours typically include black, with black bandanas and white or light grey t-shirts or tank tops, as well as red, featuring red bandanas and red hats.

Gang-related graffiti tags are also common in Indigenous gang culture. These tags often include both those that express allegiance to particular gangs and those that denounce rival gangs. Among the most frequently seen tags are those representing The Indian Mafia, The Native Syndicate, The Native Syndicate Killers, Terror Squad, and the Indian Posse. Many of these tags are even crossed out in acts of retaliation by rival gang members, such as the “1923” tag shown in ***Figure 2***, where the numbers 19 and 23 correspond to “S” and “W” in the alphabet, standing for “Saskatchewan Warriors” (Salloum, 2019a). Furthermore, some tags go beyond merely crossing out rival symbols, incorporating negative messages or direct threats aimed at other gangs, as seen in ***Figure 3*** (Salloum, 2019a). These gang tags often feature specific stylistic elements, almost like a signature, with identifiable features that make them easy to recognize. For example, one common feature is the inclusion of an arrow between the "S" and "N" in the Native Syndicate graffiti tag.

Figure 2

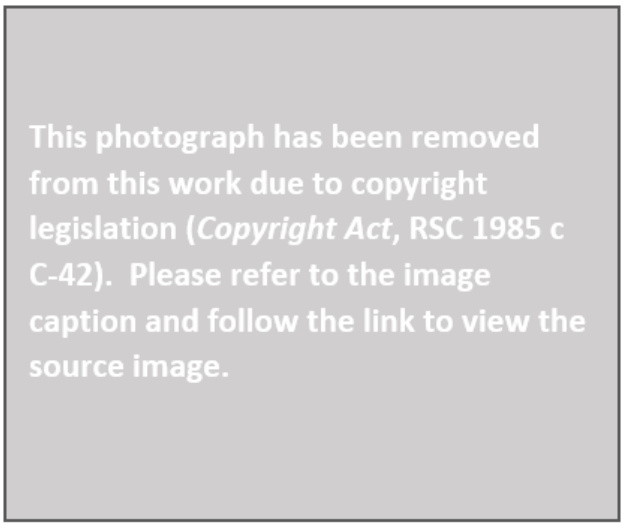
Saskatchewan Warriors "1923" Gang Tag

Note: This image, from Salloum (2019b), depicts the Saskatchewan Warriors gang tag, "1923", correlating to the letters S and W in the alphabet, crossed out by a rival gang in an attempt at intimidation.

https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatchewan/leaving-the-gang-life-after-15-years-1.5324192

Figure 3

Native Syndicate Killers Graffiti



Note: This image, also from Salloum (2019c), depicts a tag from the Native Syndicate Killers and shows how tags can sometimes incorporate direct threats between gangs.

https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatchewan/leaving-the-gang-life-after-15-years-1.5324192

Secondly, the images also revealed, though less commonly, that Indigenous gangs use hand signs/gang signs to represent their gang. The visual content analysis found photographs of members creating certain letters with their hands, such as M and W for Manitoba Warriors, M, O, and B for Most Organized Brothers, I and P for Indian Posse, N and S for Native Syndicate, and P and K for Indian Posse Killers, though the frequency of their use is unknown. Ultimately, the visual gang culture uncovered demonstrates how Indigenous gangs engage with mainstream gang culture.

Reclaiming Historical Symbols of Oppression

Another common theme of visual gang culture found in the photographs of Canada's Indigenous gangs is the use of symbols that were once tools of oppression or stereotypes targeted at Indigenous peoples. Similar to how many Black groups have reclaimed the “N-word,” it seems that Indigenous gangs are reclaiming aspects of once racist imagery in their own gang culture. One example of this reclamation is the use of the word "Indian." Outside of its legal context, the term “Indian” is considered outdated and offensive due to its historical misuse in colonialism and its ties to marginalizing, stereotyping, and assimilating Canada's Indigenous peoples (Indigenous Foundations, n.d.). In gang culture, the most common use of the word "Indian" is in gang names. The Indian Posse and the Indian Mafia are two of the most well-known examples of this term being used within this context. These gang names are not only a part of their verbal identity but are also visually represented in various forms of graffiti, clothing, logos, and tattoos.

In addition to the word “Indian,” the colour red—once considered racist due to its association with Indigenous peoples—is also being reclaimed within Indigenous gang culture. In his research on how racism has been used to justify the exploitation of Native Americans, Dodge (2022) writes that by the 19th century, racial groups were categorized by colour, with Native Americans being associated with red—a colour that became a universal symbol for savagery and violence. In a contemporary context, calling Indigenous peoples "Redskins" or using other derogatory references to Indigenous peoples as "red" is still highly offensive to many, as it perpetuates harmful stereotypes. However, through visual content analysis, it can be observed that the colour red is being reclaimed in various aspects of Indigenous gang culture, such as in clothing, gang names, tags, and slogans. The Indigenous gang Redd Alert is a prime example of this reclamation, as they not only incorporate red into their gang name but also prominently feature it in their dress code. Many photographs of Redd Alert gang members depict them wearing red clothing, from red hats and bandanas to all-red sweaters, creating a unity of red among members. Gangs have also adopted this once-discriminatory colour in their gang tags. For instance, the Native Syndicate Killers, with the tag “NSK,” and the Terror Squad, with the tag “TS,” both use red paint to mark their presence across cities in Canada, as seen in ***Figure 4.*** Additionally, the Indian Posse uses a slogan, “Red till dead,” signifying lifelong loyalty to the gang (Friesen, 2011). Many of the Indian Posse’s tattoos also incorporate red; while the tattoos are primarily greyscale, red details are often featured as part of their designs. Overall, this reclamation of the colour red serves as a powerful tool for reasserting Indigenous identity and reclaiming the symbols that were once used to marginalize and stereotype their communities.

Figure 4

Terror Squad Red Tag

Note: This photograph from Zakreski (2018) is an example of how the colour red is used and incorporated by gangs in tagging and graffiti. The image was taken in Saskatchewan and shows a common red tag by a Terror Squad member. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/terror-squad-saskatoon-gang-murder-trial-1.4828641

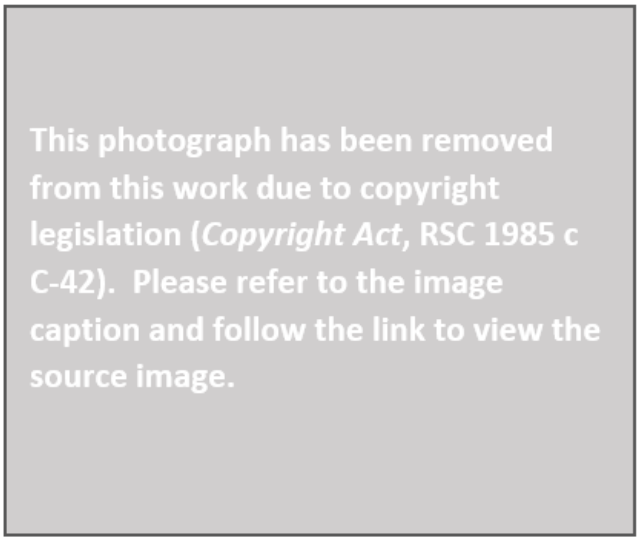
Common Traditional Imagery and Symbols

Common traditional Indigenous symbols are also identified in these images of Indigenous gangs. A common symbol found, for example, is the imagery of the eagle feather. Although the traditional significance of the eagle feather can slightly vary from nation to nation, Robert Maracle, a member of the Tyendinaga Mohawks Bay of Quinte, explains that the eagle is widely regarded as the strongest spirit in Indigenous communities and receiving a single feather from an Elder is a significant honour, symbolizing the potential for personal growth and a life dedicated to kindness and care for all beings (Maracle, personal communication, 2025). The eagle feather is found to be incorporated into Indigenous gang culture in several forms, such as tattoos and logos. Daniel Wolfe, one of the founding members of the Indian Posse, for example, has the gang

name “Indian Posse” tattooed in large letters across his upper back in red ink with two large eagle feathers hanging from the first and last letter of the gang name, seen in ***Figure 5.*** Also incorporated in his Indian Posse tattoo is a portrait of a young Indigenous man wearing a red hat and bandana with two long braids. Braids also traditionally hold spiritual and cultural significance in Indigenous communities. Knowledge keeper Ernie Michell explains that among the Nlaka’pamux Indigenous peoples of the Tuckkwiowhum Heritage Village, hair represents strength and holds teachings that have been passed down from generations (Gold Rush Trail, n.d). Additionally, hair is an extension of the spirit, and the longer the hair is, the more connected one is to the land (Gold Rush Trail, n.d). Thus, Daniel Wolfe's Indian Posse tattoo depicting eagle feathers and braids is just one example of how traditional Indigenous symbolism makes its way into Indigenous gang culture. One of Redd Alert’s logos also has a similar use of the eagle feather. Just as Daniel Wolfe's Indian Posse tattoo has hanging feathers, two eagle feathers hang on the first and last letter of the name “Redd Alert” on the gang's jackets, incorporating this traditional symbol of significance in visual gang culture.

Figure 5

Indian Posse Tattoo



Note: This is a photograph of a tattoo of a young Indigenous man with long braided hair with the gang name “Indian Posse" and eagle feathers hanging off the lettering. From *Image of Daniel Wolfe's Back Tattoo* by Joe Friesen [Photograph], 2016, The Globe and Mail. https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/the-ballad-of-danny-wolfe-the-breakout/article29719039/

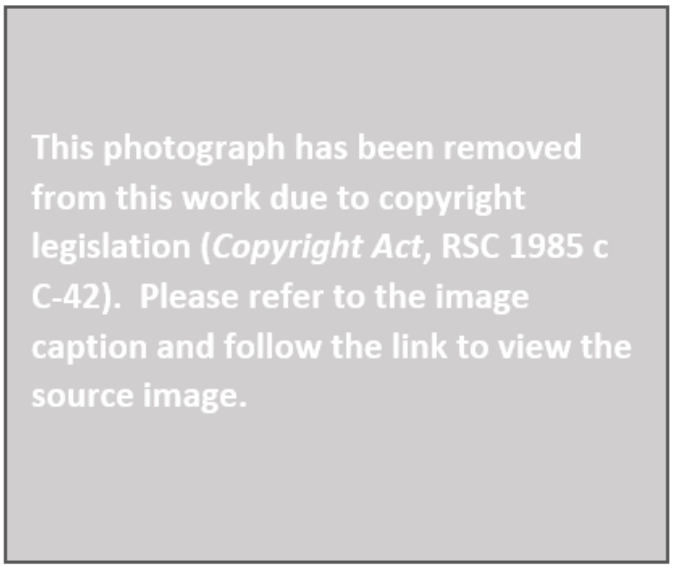
Eagle feathers also go hand-in-hand with dream catchers, another aspect of traditional Indigenous symbolism that holds significance and is often used in visual gang culture. As Elder Hazel explains through storytelling, the dreamcatcher came to be a long time ago when a Kôhkom met a spider and created a gift for her that would catch bad dreams after she had saved his life (Royal Saskatchewan Museum, 2021). Dreamcatchers are also seen on many gang logos and clothing, such as the Native Syndicate's biker vests, which depict multiple types of dreamcatchers with two or four eagle feathers. While these traditional symbols are often used individually to represent gangs, they are also combined to create specific images, such as the warrior, which is commonly seen as the face of Indigenous gangs in Canada.

The Use of The Warrior

One of the most prominent elements of traditional Indigenous symbolism and imagery that has found its way into gang culture is the use of the warrior. While mainstream media, particularly Hollywood, has often distorted the authentic portrayal of the Indigenous warrior, some aspects of the authentic historical representation remain. This includes elements such as the clothing, regalia, and weapons traditionally associated with Indigenous warriors. Interestingly, particular gangs blend both the popularized media depiction and the authentic, historical imagery of Indigenous warriors, creating a fusion that reflects both modern and traditional influences in their gang culture. One of the more obvious uses of the warrior archetype is in gangs that name themselves after the warrior. For example, the Manitoba Warriors, along with the other provinces' warrior gangs, such as the Alberta Warriors, the Saskatchewan Warriors, and the Kelowna Warriors, to name a few, all directly use the warrior in their gang names. In addition to gang names, imagery of the warrior is also commonly seen in these gang cultures. The Manitoba Warriors is just one gang that uses a version of a traditional warrior image as its logo, which is present on its gang flags, patches, and clothing. This portrayal of the warrior shows a skull wearing a feathered, beaded headband. Additionally, some alternative versions of this logo depict the skull wearing a war bonnet or headdress rather than the feathered headband, which is gifted to leaders of Indigenous communities through traditional ceremonies and protocols, as well as two tomahawks crossing, a weapon that is commonly seen in the warrior portrayal, which can be seen in ***Figure 6*** and ***Figure 7***. (Monkman, 2016).

Figure 6

Manitoba Warriors Logos



Note: This image of gang regalia and logos demonstrates how the use of warrior images make their way into gang street wear and gang pride. From *Manitoba Warrior Gang Wear* by Jeff Stapelton [Photograph], 2017a, CBC News. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/guns-gang-clothing-seized-by-police-1.4289865

Figure 7

Manitoba Warriors Patches

Note: This is an image of Manitoba Warrior gang patches depicting the use of the warrior in both gang apparel and accessories. From *Manitoba Warrior Gang Wear* by Jeff Stapelton [Photograph], 2017b, CBC News. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/guns-gang-clothing-seized-by-police-1.4289865

Beyond the tomahawk, the bow and arrow is another weapon associated with the warrior's identity. Much like the tomahawk, which appears in gang symbolism, the arrow is also featured in many gang logos. For instance, within the Native Syndicate Dreamcatcher, which was discussed above, a tomahawk and arrow cross each other, symbolizing the traditional weapons of the warrior. Similarly, some versions of the Redd Alert logo display two arrows crossing inside an arrowhead, positioned between the "R" and "A" of the gang's jacket design. Overall, the use of the warrior is evident both in gang names and the imagery that permeates Indigenous gang culture. The most prominent and common symbols of the warrior are their weapons and skulls adorned with headdresses or war bonnets that continue to play a central role in the visual and symbolic language of Indigenous gangs. Overall, the traditional Indigenous symbols integrated into Indigenous gang culture appear to represent the strength, sovereignty, and resilience of Indigenous peoples. This phenomenon can be understood through a concept known as resistant identities, which will be explored in the next section.

Why Are These Aspects Being Used in Indigenous Gang Cultures?

As discussed, many aspects of traditional Indigenous representation incorporated into these gangs include symbols that hold deep historical significance among Indigenous peoples, as well as symbols of strength and resistance. Traditional symbols, such as the eagle feather and the dreamcatcher, often appear in gang imagery to suggest that these gangs have a deeper purpose or connection compared to non-Indigenous gangs that are primarily driven by money and power. Additionally, these symbols may serve to attract new members by offering a sense of spiritual

and cultural belonging within the gang. Bucerius et al. (2021) explain that gang leaders sometimes deliberately link their groups to Indigenous culture to enhance the gang's appeal to marginalized individuals. Consequently, Indigenous gang culture often blends elements of American ghetto culture with Indigenous traditions (Bucerius et al., 2021; Mukherjee, 2006). Furthermore, another reason traditional Indigenous symbols are incorporated into gang culture is as a means of reclaiming what was taken from Indigenous communities and wearing it with pride. Much like how Indigenous gangs have reappropriated once-oppressive terms such as "Indian" or the colour red, these gangs use once-outlawed or stolen Indigenous symbols to resist colonial powers and reclaim pride in their Indigenous heritage, thus expressing resistant identities.

Resistant Identities

As Comack and Deane (2013) explain, resistance is a common theme in critical gang studies. Indigenous gang members, in particular, have faced unique challenges due to their distinct histories and backgrounds, which have significantly impacted their gang identities. These identities are often shaped by the loss and reclamation of cultural values and traditions, serving as a form of empowerment and resistance to colonial powers that initially suppressed them. For example, in 1884, traditional Indigenous ceremonies, such as Potlatches and Sundances, were outlawed in Canada, while the Indian residential school system forbade children from speaking their traditional languages and forced them to adopt European and Christian customs, leading to a loss of cultural identity (Anzovino et al., 2019). Additionally, disenfranchisement through the Indian Act, the Sixties Scoop, and other colonial practices has left Indigenous communities grappling with the erosion of their cultural practices. This has had a particularly negative impact on youths, who often grow up disconnected from their traditional Indigenous knowledge, leading

them to search for a cultural identity elsewhere. Colonial powers have left many Indigenous peoples dealing with two central intertwined themes: (1) resisting colonial oppression and reclaiming traditional aspects of culture that were stolen, and (2) searching for cultural identities.

Due to the loss of cultural identity in Indigenous communities, urban Indigenous peoples are often perceived as inauthentic (Alvarez, 2017). This perception can lead Indigenous youths and others to struggle with their identity and struggle to find ways to navigate and assert their cultural belonging, even if this means adopting them for deviant or criminal ways, such as in gangs, groups originally formed to empower members and challenge the dominant societal systems. The Indian Posse, for example, exemplifies these themes. Many of the gang's leaders were quite knowledgeable about Indigenous and colonial histories, aiming to transform the gang into a force of resistance, even creating a manifesto centred on reclaiming Indigenous pride by force (Bucerius et al., 2021; Friesen, 2011). Symbols such as the eagle feather and dreamcatchers, for example, are intentionally adopted in apparent ways and are purposefully used to create the perception that these groups are connected to their Indigenous heritage and are reclaiming their cultural identity and, in turn, helping them resist oppressive powers.

As seen in the findings, the image of the warrior is a particularly common display adopted by Indigenous gangs, as it is not only one of the traditional aspects once stolen and reclaimed, but the warrior is also a traditional symbol of strength and resistance. During an interview with Richard Wolfe, one of The Indian Posse's founding members, and The Winnipeg Free Press, the gang was compared to a warrior society (Friesen, 2011). Similar to how other traditional Indigenous symbols are used, such as the dreamcatcher, the eagle feather, and long braided hair, the warrior is reclaimed in gang culture to contribute to a cultural and gang identity. It is important to note, however, that while some Indigenous symbols are used to express deviant

and illegal activity through their use and representation in gangs, other Indigenous symbols may be seen as deviant solely because they are used by Indigenous peoples to illustrate a unique culture, opposite to the dominant one (Horn-Miller, 2003). The Mohawk warrior flag, for example, represents the unity of Indigenous peoples in a common struggle and is now being used as a symbol of resistance in movements among Indigenous peoples (Horn-Miller, 2003). Interestingly, the Manitoba Warrior logo has many parallels to the Mohawk Warrior flag, both featuring the side profile of a warrior's head. Additionally, both incorporate a sun-like design behind the warrior's head, a feature of cultural significance on the Mohawk Warrior flag. These parallels likely stem from the shared purpose of both symbols: to reclaim pride for Indigenous peoples and represent strength. However, the Manitoba Warrior logo carries connotations of criminality and deviance. Overall, Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred explains that the warrior would traditionally protect communities from harm and fight against oppressive powers, resulting in gangs portraying themselves as the warrior to help them form a resistant identity and creating this "Urban Warrior" (Henry, 2015).

Moving Forward

In her book, *The Colonial Problem*, which explores the colonial impact on Indigenous peoples in the Canadian Criminal Justice System, Monchalin (2016) writes that "Only by addressing all that fuels the cycle of crime affecting Indigenous peoples-past and current trauma, racism, continuing colonialism, inequality, and Eurocentric ideologies that commodify the land and its inhabitants-can we hope to break this cycle" (p. 173). In summary, in order to address the recurring problem of high Indigenous incarceration, recidivism, and gang rates, one must first address how colonialism has and continues to negatively impact Indigenous communities and leads many Indigenous peoples into the criminal justice system. Specifically, after exploring

some of the major contributing factors influencing Indigenous gang creation and joining, it is clear that at the root of why Indigenous peoples enter gangs is because of the state in which colonialism has left Indigenous communities, often feeling isolated, displaced, marginalized, and in search of connection and cultural identity. The ways in which traditional Indigenous aspects and symbols are used also inform research into why and how Indigenous peoples interact with gangs. Based on these findings, it is apparent that traditional Indigenous symbols are being misused and misrepresented in Indigenous gang culture and that the real meanings and cultural significance of many of the symbols being used are not being adequately taught or passed down to younger generations, most likely as a result of these colonial factors discussed. Given this, it is probable that if policy and program makers focused on cultural revitalization efforts and concentrated on programs that taught Indigenous youths the real meanings of these symbols, Indigenous youths could regain traditional cultural knowledge and connection to their Indigenous communities. These cultural revitalization efforts could be run by Elders and knowledge keepers and can be integrated into multiple stages of the Canadian criminal justice system. For example, if taught to Indigenous youths before gang involvement or contact with the criminal justice system, they may feel as though they have gained a sense of cultural identity and, as a result, they would not feel the need to find it in deviant ways such as through gangs. Alternatively, suppose these programs reach them when they are already gang-involved or involved in the criminal justice system. In that case, it may allow them to transform these symbols into positive ones, giving these individuals positive outlets to deal with their colonial past and heal from intergenerational trauma, rather than through gang affiliations. Having programs in place that provide a sense of cultural identity and teach authentic traditional Indigenous knowledge may also result in the connection or re-connection to positive familial ties

rather than criminal ones. This is also an important factor that may help gang members exit gangs. As Chalas and Grekul (2017) argue, children and family are two of the most common reasons that gang members leave gangs, and strong relationships between youths and their parents, school, communities, and families are major protective factors for gang involvement.

Some pre- and post-criminal justice contact programs that focus on cultural revitalization are already in place for Indigenous youths and adults, such as the YMCA Brave Dogs Clan. This program aims to understand how intergenerational trauma affects connections to culture and identity and to pass on cultural teachings to youths through storytelling, traditional activities, and Elder guidance (YMCA Calgary, n.d). Some programs already in place also incorporate traditional Indigenous aspects just as gangs do, but do so in a meaningful, authentic, and positive way. For example, the warrior is also used in the TAPWE: youth Warrior Program, which is offered at The Edmonton Young Offender Centre and was designed by Native Counselling Services of Alberta (Chalas & Grekul, 2017). Another, less formalized, group that follows suit and incorporates once derogatory aspects used against Indigenous peoples, just as many of the gangs do, is The Crazy Indians Brotherhood. Members of The Crazy Indians Brotherhood wear black leather vests with an image of a warrior on the back as their logo, as many Indigenous gangs do; however, the purpose of this group is to give former gang members an opportunity at redemption (Grebinski, 2015). While the group has many similarities to Indigenous gangs in their use of traditional Indigenous symbols, their similarities to these gangs stop there, as they aim to help community members (Grebinski, 2015). Overall, while some programs are already in place, integrating more of these programs into the Canadian criminal justice system, for post-criminal justice contact, or community accessible programs, for pre-criminal justice contact may provide an environment where Indigenous peoples can feel proud of their culture, what it

authentically represents and provide a cultural identity that will not need to be obtained through gang affiliations, thus lowering the Indigenous gang rate in Canada.

Conclusion

Although Indigenous peoples only make up 5.0% of the Canadian population, Indigenous street gangs are some of the most prominent gangs in the country (Statistics Canada, 2023). It is, therefore, essential to expand the current understanding in the criminology, criminal justice, and sociology discourse as to why so many Indigenous peoples turn to the gang lifestyle, as well as how this understanding can turn Indigenous youths away from this deviant and often criminal path. Specifically, it is essential to understand how Canada's Indigenous gang culture, something that has not been explored thoroughly in the currently existing literature separate from gang culture in general, to a large extent, influences and compels youths to join and take part in illegal gang-related activities. This research paper explored Indigenous gang culture, with a particular focus on its use of traditional Indigenous aspects such as traditional symbols, names, and other visuals. Additionally, the paper aimed to uncover what caused their use and how their use may be changed from symbols of gang culture to positive influences in the lives of Indigenous youths, swaying them away from the gang lifestyle.

Through previous research conducted, which was examined in the semi-systematic literature review, the impact of colonialism in the creation of Indigenous gangs, as well as the factors influencing individuals to enter both Indigenous and other racialized gangs, were identified. Many of these factors are direct results of colonialism's impact on Indigenous peoples in Canada, such as poverty and educational disparities in Indigenous neighbourhoods. Other reasons persuading Indigenous individuals to enter gangs were also identities and included family ties, racialized poverty, survivance and empowerment after colonialism, and gaining

power and respect. Key themes within gang culture that often apply to Indigenous gang culture were also uncovered and include themes of violence, hypermasculinity, and exhibiting specific power dynamics associated with a sexual hierarchy. In addition to this gang culture, many gangs also depict certain aspects of visual gang culture, which typically involves gang members flaunting materialistic items such as cars or jewelry or showing their gang pride through gang names, symbols/logos, colours, graffiti tags, clothing style, and gang hand signals.

Within the visual ethnography, these aspects of visual gang culture were examined through visual content analysis of photographs of Canada's Indigenous gangs. This analysis uncovered four significant themes within the visual gang culture of Indigenous gangs, depicting both the commonly used symbols in mainstream gang culture as well as gang culture specific to traditional Indigenous representation. These four themes include: (1) the adoption of non-traditionally Indigenous visual gang culture, such as the use of graffiti tags or typical dress to represent unity amongst gang members; (2) the use of visuals and names in gang culture that reclaim historical symbols of oppression, such as the colour red or the word "Indian"; (3) the use of common traditional Indigenous symbols in gang logos or tags, such as dreamcatchers, eagle feathers, and braided hair; and finally, (4) the use of traditional warrior imagery and representation. Much of the literature suggests that these traditional aspects make their way into gang culture to entice Indigenous youths, who have limited connection to traditional cultural values and knowledge due to colonialism and intergenerational trauma, to join the gang. Additionally, much of the incorporation of these traditional aspects is used as a way to reclaim a cultural identity that was once taken and criminalized by colonial oppressive powers and to portray themselves as a strong, united front—similar to that of a group of warriors—against the state, presenting behaviours of resistant identities.

Overall, by understanding how and why aspects of traditional Indigenous representation are being incorporated into Canada's Indigenous gang culture, policymakers and program developers can make more informed decisions when creating initiatives aimed at reducing the number of Indigenous gang members and, ideally, eliminating Indigenous gangs altogether. It is important to recognize that many of these traditional elements are adopted into gang culture as a result of Indigenous peoples searching for a cultural identity that was stripped away through colonial powers. With this in mind, programs and policies designed to reconnect Indigenous peoples with traditional knowledge and teachings could help them reclaim that cultural identity. These initiatives can be implemented both before and after contact with the criminal justice system, serving as preventive measures for Indigenous youths or as support for helping gang members exit the lifestyle. By offering opportunities for Indigenous youths and offenders to regain cultural knowledge and understand the true significance of these symbols, these programs could help restore the cultural identity they may have lost and now no longer need to find in gangs.

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